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OPINION

Using Soviet lend-lease payments to fund cultural exchange

By Pat M. Holt

THERE are so many issues in US-Soviet relations that the lend-lease debt stemming from World War II tends to be overlooked. But this is one issue with a relatively simple solution.

First some background: Under the Lend-Lease Act of 1941, the United States sent billions of dollars of war materiel to its allies while postponing the question of payment until after the war. In the euphoria of victory, the United States forgave all except materiel which would be useful to the postwar civilian economy (trucks, for example). In the case of the Soviet Union, this residual civilian-type lend-lease was valued by the United States at \$2.6 billion (out of total lend-lease to the Soviet Union of \$10.8 billion). The Soviet government at first offered to pay \$170 million.

Negotiations dragged on intermittently for 25 years. Then in 1972 agreement was reached on \$722 million to be paid in installments running through 2001. The catch was that the lend-lease settlement was dependent on implementation of a trade agreement under which the US would extend most-favored-nation treatment to the Soviet Union. The trade agreement was scuttled by the Jackson-Vanik amendment to the Trade Act of 1974, which made most-favored-nation treatment contingent on Soviet liberalization of Jewish emigration. When the Soviets balked on emigration, the trade and lend-lease agreements came crashing down. By that point, the Soviets had actually paid \$48 million, leaving a balance of \$674 million.

The suggestion here is that the United States propose to the Soviet Union that payments be resumed and that they be earmarked for educational and cultural exchange — for the support of Americans studying or teaching in the Soviet Union and of Soviet citizens studying or teaching in the United States. This would represent a major expansion of one of the most successful American foreign policies — the program under which Fulbright scholars have covered the world. (The Fulbright program was also originally financed with surplus property left over at the end of World War II.) In no country do we need such a program more than in the Soviet Union.

Such a disposition of the lend-lease debt should be attractive to the Soviets. Since the exchanges would be mutual and since the expenses of Americans in the Soviet Union would be paid in rubles, the dollar cost of the settlement to the USSR would be cut in half. An exchange agreement would also fill the need Soviet leader Gorbachev apparently feels to take an initial step forward in improving his relations with the US.

It would fill the same need for President Reagan, and it would have the further advantage of not affecting the budget. The program would be paid for with money which otherwise we would not get.

From the point of view of both countries, the pro-

gram's most important advantages are broader and longer lasting. It would begin to nibble away at the vast culture gap between the two countries and at the mountains of ignorance and stereotypes which affect the way the two peoples perceive each other. A small example of the kind of cultural exchange that could be fostered was provided a few weeks ago when a group of people from the American state of Georgia got together with a group from the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. The improvement in US-Chinese relations began with a touring American ping-pong team.

The program envisaged here, of course, would go far beyond feeding visitors Southern barbecue or playing ping-pong with them. It would give significant numbers of American and Soviet citizens the opportunity to study or to teach in the other country. On the basis of our experience with the Fulbright program, we can assume that a substantial percentage of these participants would turn out to be influential leaders over the next generation.

Two objections — one American, one Soviet — may be anticipated. In the US, some people will worry that Russians coming to the United States will not be content to study American history or government or literature but will want to study physics or computer science and learn our technological secrets. (It is not possible to keep technology secret, but some people think it is.) Or the Soviets might want to go to the Harvard Business School or Iowa State University and learn how to run their economy and agriculture better. (In the process they might also decide that there is something to be said for the life styles of Cambridge, Mass., and Ames, Iowa.)

From the Soviet point of view, the objection will be that the visiting Americans will subvert the Soviet people with the alien ideas of Thomas Jefferson and that the program will most likely provide cover for hordes of CIA agents. (Congress has insisted that the CIA stay out of the Fulbright program, and the CIA says it has done so.) Some Americans will voice mirror images of these Soviet objections.

None of these anxieties in either Washington or Moscow is substantial. If one takes them seriously, one is led inexorably to the conclusion that the gulf between the United States and the Soviet Union is permanent and unbridgeable. Such a conclusion points to disaster.

An exchange program by itself will not avoid disaster. But it will at least light a small, flickering candle in the darkness that now surrounds us.

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